

# Women in Military Service for America

An Interview with Brigadier General Wilma L. Vaught, USAF, Retired

by Mrs Gloria R. Jaskiewicz

Former  
Air Force  
Comptroller  
Helps Establish  
Women's  
Memorial

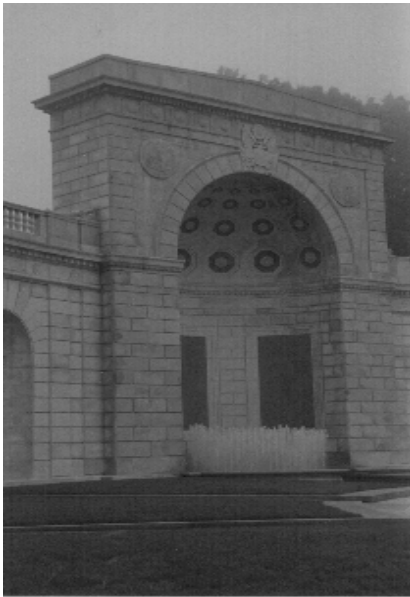
I caught the Metro from the Pentagon station to Arlington National Cemetery. It had been two weeks since the dedication of Women in Military Service for America Memorial and I was there to interview Brigadier General Wilma L. Vaught, USAF, Retired, and President of the Board of Directors, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc. It was early in the morning and so many tourists—both men and women. I had no idea how difficult this interview would be at the memorial. General Vaught is an icon to women veterans—the spokesperson for women that have served and are serving in the military.

She posed for and with the veterans, the families of veterans, and other tourists. One constant was the smile and pleasure she seemed to have with every picture taken or question asked. She is proud of the memorial and so are the women veterans. You can sense their deep pride—from the friends, the fathers, the mothers, the husbands, the sons, and the daughters of women veterans—it showed on their faces.

The memorial was built at the ceremonial Grand Entrance to Arlington National Cemetery. The road to this memorial—from the American Revolution to the present—has taken over 220 years. It began in the American Revolution where women were nurses, water bearers, cooks, and saboteurs and continues today with women working a host of military specialties—astronauts, fighter pilots, and guards for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The memorial commemorates the service of more than 1.8 billion women who have served their country. It is a tribute to military women—past, present, and future. It reflects Duty, Honor, Country, and Pride. These words come to life in the exhibits and stories of women who have served.

That morning, the first “at the memorial” retirement ceremony was being prepared. It was very fitting that the first person to retire there was a woman—a Chief Master Sergeant. The ceremony was to be held in the auditorium-style theater. The theater with purple seats—the color symbolizing jointness within the Services.

You may be asking yourself, what does this have to do with Comptrollership? The link is Wilma L. Vaught—a former Air Force comptroller. A woman of many firsts. The first woman selected for promotion to Brigadier General in the comptroller career field. The first woman to graduate from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces at Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D.C. The first woman major



## Women in Military Service for America (Continued)...

command comptroller. The first woman to head a board of directors of a major credit union. The first woman to command a unit receiving the Joint Meritorious Unit Award. The first woman to deploy with a Strategic Air Command bombardment wing on an operational deployment.

General Vaught's road to the memorial began in 1957 as a Lieutenant when she took the oath of office to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. This was during a time when women made up less than one percent of the Air Force. Enroute, her educational path took her from Illinois, where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; to Alabama where she earned a Master of Business Administration

degree from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; and in 1991 to South Carolina where she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Public Affairs from Columbia College. She was also awarded the Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award by the University of Illinois in May 1983.

As you approach the memorial, you see a fountain and reflecting pool which symbolizes life. Staircases through archways represent the breaking down of barriers. Inside there is a gift shop—the only one in the world specializing in memorabilia for women service members and veterans. It also specializes in books written by women in the military. In addition there is a Donor Recognition Wall; 196-seat Theater; Exhibit Gallery which showcases artifacts, text, and memorable images donated by women who have served in the military or by their families; a Hall of Honor; an Education Center; and the heart of the memorial—the Computer Registration. The Register is a computerized database of information about the women. You can access the photographs, military history, and individual stories of the registrants by typing their name into one of the computer terminals.

On the upper terrace are huge glass tablets, inscribed with quotations by and about women who have served. When sunlight passes over these tablets it creates shadows of the texts on the walls of the gallery below.



The Air Force provided the opportunity and Wilma L. Vaught met the challenge. Her military career led her to various comptroller positions at Barksdale AFB LA; Zaragoza AB, Spain; McCoy AFB FL; Saigon, Vietnam; Wright-Patterson AFB OH; The Pentagon, Washington DC; Andrews AFB MD; and Ft Sheridan IL.



During her ten years on the board of directors for the memorial foundation, she reflected on the many challenges the military prepared her for. The Air Force, particularly her assignments at the Pentagon, Air Force Systems Command, and her last assignment as a Commander, honed her skills in management, acquisition, program management, contracting, and speech writing and presentation. She believes we sometimes lose sight of how much we are learning and how much it applies to other things that

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we'll do in life. She is a woman of high ideals and integrity. She led by setting the standard for others to follow. She is proudest of the fact that she stood and was counted.

She believes financial management is and will be a vital function—one that must not be overlooked. She continues to stress the importance of high standards of ethics that people in the Financial Management career field must have. The importance of knowing the right thing from the legal point of view and the moral point of view. Financial managers must continue to be the leaders who demonstrate the highest standards of integrity and conduct. General Vaught believes there is always a place for a person who understands financial management and who is willing to be a watchdog to ensure things are done properly. This is even more important in a downsizing environment.

I asked Gen Vaught if she could breathe easier now with the dedication of the memorial behind her. By no means was her reply—it is only the beginning. The primary mission remains—to make visible the role of women in the military and their accomplishments and achievements. The Education Center needs finishing, we need to get more women registered, more money needs to be raised, and there is the ever changing and updating of displays. You can say the work is just beginning.

Today 17% of the members of the Air Force are women. Women account for 193,114 of the 1.42 million Americans in uniform. The memorial and the foundation have become the repository of memorabilia for the history of women in the military. The story is there to tell and the memorial tells it well.

The Air Force financial management community is proud of Brigadier General (retired) Wilma L. Vaught and the outstanding contribution she has made to maintain the memory of all military women who have served their country.



QUESTIONS about the memorial?  
Requests for information should be sent to:

Women in Military Service for America  
Memorial Foundation, Dept 560  
Washington, DC 20042-0560

703-533-1155 or  
1-800-222-2294